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# Cyberbullying: Between the Virtual and the Real

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## **Abstract**

In modern society, the use of information communication technologies and digital services is intensifying. The post-Covid-19 era brings many changes in all social spheres and stands out for its unprecedented reliance on digital technologies. Younger generations, who have had intensive interaction with them since the earliest days, are finding their place in the cyber world and, in this way, are increasingly erasing the boundaries between the real and the digital. Vulnerability of human life is one of the characteristics of cyber security and as a very complex phenomenon that is fully justified to be studied in a multidisciplinary manner. Cyberbullying is a widespread phenomenon, most often expressed among the younger population, which can produce great negative consequences for an individual, and even the loss of human life. In addition to the fact that it is necessary to work on raising awareness and pointing out the unsafe cyberspace in which interaction and communication take place, it is necessary to give an adequate response from the aspect of education and information security culture in order to preserve what is most valuable. This paper aims to present and offer some answers to the mentioned phenomenon.

*Keywords:* cyberbullying, cyber security, cyber world, information security culture, information and communication technologies

## **Cyberbullying: Between the Virtual and the Real**

Today's modern society largely depends on the intensive use of information and communication technologies. The most famous global computer network, the Internet, is characterized by ubiquity, i.e. connecting anywhere and anytime. The availability of various WWW services, such as e-mail, instant messaging, searching, viewing, creating and sharing a wide variety of content, connecting and communicating through social networks, have led to greater use of computers as well as mobile phones. It can rightly be said that we live in an era of global information technology and communication connectivity, i.e. high technological dependence, which requires adequate protection (Vesić et al., 2022, p. 92). Security awareness, a security culture focusing on cyber security, is needed more than ever. In addition to the tremendous technological opportunities available to individuals, organizations and society as a whole, many threats evolve and are transferred in a more or less different form to the digital world until the consequences do not disappear. High technological dependence blurs the line between the virtual and the real.

According to the authors, digital violence has its ontological root and origin in violence in general, so digital violence in its essence does not differ at all from general violence as a characteristic of the human species (Bjelajac & Filipović, 2021, p. 18). In contrast to traditional violence, psychological damage that can lead to loss of life, digital violence takes place through the use of digital means, i.e. computers and mobile devices. Cyber security is the protection of cyberspace itself, electronic information, the ICT that supports the space, and the users of cyberspace in their personal, social and national capacity, including any of their interests, measurable or immeasurable, that are vulnerable to attacks originating in cyberspace (Von Solms & Van Niekerk, 2013, p. 101). Therefore, digital violence is not only a psychological problem but also a social and security problem.

It is known that this form of violation of cyber security most

often occurs among members of the younger population, who are the future of the family first, and then of the state and society in general, so it is necessary to pay special attention to this phenomenon considering its devastating and far-reaching consequences. In the continuation of the paper, we will deal with the concept, forms and consequences of digital violence. Then we will look at the actuality of the problem and prevention measures against this very complex phenomenon.

### **Defining cyberbullying**

With the advent of personal computers and then the World Wide Web, as the most famous Internet service, their use for business, educational, and private purposes is increasing. In particular, there has been an increase in the use of the Web with the emergence of social networks. Social networks have intensified human-computer interaction, with the goal that two or more people can participate in communication through computers. In contrast to the beginnings of the mass use of instant messaging software, in which it was necessary to know the code or identifier of the person with whom we want to exchange messages and at the same time to know the platform he uses: ICQ, AIM, MSN, etc., social networks have filled cyberspace with online profiles of people that are publicly available or through the simplest search in search engines. In that space, they upload pictures of themselves and their family, then pictures of people they hang out with and interact with in real life, video materials, write impressions and leave comments and do all of this publicly.

Mobile phones, and above all smart mobile phones, enable users to have a permanent device with less power and capacity than a desktop or portable account but with good enough capabilities to continue their interaction on all popular social networks. Companies that are owners of social networks saw the possibility that they could complete the interaction on social networks with the exchange of instant messages, and for this reason, they integrated them into

their platforms, i.e. Web and mobile applications. Users are offered the ubiquity of the Internet with the possibility to make a good part of their life public and share it on the most diverse social networks, in the cyber world, with the possibility that anyone can communicate with them by exchanging messages. In the described way, the interaction between man and computer is intensified because the interaction between man and man through the computer is intensified. This changes the nature of many phenomena, especially those where the intensity and frequency of the manifestation of certain behaviour, positive or negative, directed towards other people are important.

The concept of digital violence is not easy to define because of many similar concepts that are used and mixed up in everyday speech and which need to be separately processed, and clear differences between them should be pointed out, and a certain degradation of the concepts should be established. Dinić conducts an extensive analysis of psychological research and makes a distinction between the following concepts (Dinić, 2022, pp. 10–39):

- aggression – any behavior with the intention of causing harm to another, which the other wants to avoid
- aggressiveness – a special personality, i.e. a predisposition to aggressive behavior or the strength of an aggressive motive related to the desire to annoy someone
- violence – intentional and unjustified harm to another (in the context of interpersonal relationships)
- peer violence – aggressive behaviour in which the actor or bully uses his body and some other object to cause injury or discomfort to another person
- bullying – bullying in peer relationships of children and adolescents, possibly young people, including bullying between siblings

From the definitions offered, it can be seen that there are small but clear enough differences between the concepts that can be applied in this paper. One of the most cited definitions in the literature states that cyberbullying is intentional and repeated harm caused by the use of computers, mobile phones and other electronic devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014). According to the same authors,

this phenomenon includes the following elements (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014):

- Willful: The behavior has to be deliberate, not accidental
- Repeated: Bullying reflects a pattern of behavior, not just one isolated incident.
- Harm: The target must perceive that harm was inflicted.
- Computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices: This, of course, is what differentiates cyberbullying from traditional bullying

Other authors use the definition that digital violence is the use of electronic communication technologies for the violence of others (Kowalski et al., 2014, p. 1074). It is an aggressive, deliberate action carried out by an individual or group using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly over time against a target that cannot be easily defended against (Smith & Slonje, 2010, p. 349). A number of definitions and determinations of the term speak of the fact that cyberbullying is a specific form of violence that occurs in the digital world. Violence, according to Olweus, is defined as repetitive and intentional behaviour by one or more individuals towards a victim who is difficult to defend due to the imbalance of power in the relationship between the harasser and the victim (Olweus, 1994). It can be direct (e.g. overt attack on the victim) or indirect (e.g. social isolation), and can be physical, verbal or relational form (Smith et al., 2008). From a legal perspective, cyberbullying can be seen as a crime that is an extension of traditional violence. Cyberbullying takes the form of verbal abuse in cyberspace (Syaidi & Suparno, 2021, p. 2).

Some authors, from a pedagogical point of view, identify digital violence and cyberbullying, where cyberbullying is an aggressive and intentional act carried out by electronic media. At the same time, other terms are also used, such as online violence, violence in cyberspace, etc. (Jevtić, 2022, p. 46). From the aspect of security, Filipović points out that digital violence is a far more dangerous phenomenon because it does not refer to the seriousness and danger that threatens the victims, which can be objects in a wide range, from individuals to the state and their conglomerates. (Filipović, 2022, p.

114). From all of the above, it can be said that it is not at all simple to unambiguously define the concept of digital violence and concepts related to it.

On the other hand, the group of authors suggest that cyberbullying, as much as it is connected with bullying, requires its own special research since elements that confirm it has been observed. For example, with social networks, cyberbullying has three main characteristics that distinguish it from traditional bullying (Khairi et al., 2022, pp. 266–267):

- social networks have a large number of users, so the humiliation of the victim can be witnessed by a wide audience, even unknown users who do not belong to one's social circle
- with the Internet's unlimited capacity to store content, offensive content can be available for long periods and can be downloaded and reposted multiple times
- cyberbullies can be anonymous, hiding their real-life identity and using fake profiles

The specificity of cyberbullying comes from the specificity of communication carried out via the Internet, and it can be far more dangerous than traditional peer violence (Rančić, 2018, p. 96). At the same time, due to the ubiquity of the Internet and the wide availability of digital devices, cyberbullying can also occur outside of school (while traditional violence occurs more often in school (Englander et al., 2017, p. 149). This means that the process continues in the environment where the children should be safe, so the pressure is much greater because they cannot escape from that situation. Although detailed research has not been carried out, certain results indicate a greater connection between cyberbullying and depression and the use of illegal substances compared to traditional violence (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2013), psychological, social, pedagogical, security and legal point of view.

Human-computer interaction, abbreviated HCI, is a multidisciplinary field that arises at the intersection of psychology and cognitive science, ergonomics, sociology, computer science and engineering, business, graphic design, technical writing, etc., with computer science and system design occupying the central place (Dix et al., 2004, p. 4).

Bearing in mind that the phenomenon of cyberbullying takes place in the cyber world, and at the same time that there is a rapid evolution of ICT that affects the evolution of this phenomenon, in the author's opinion, future research should include human-computer interaction to the greatest extent possible, looked at the complexity of interaction (from human-machine interaction to human-human interaction) and offered solutions.

### **Cyberbullying forms**

In practice, there are many forms of cyberbullying due to the complex communication that takes place on the Internet, Web portals, social networks, applications and the exchange of instant messages (especially in the form of groups) between known or anonymous participants. Some of the frequent forms are (Bergman, 2023):

- Exclusion – a cyberbully may intentionally leave someone out of an online group or message exchange, which can make the victim feel isolated and depressed;
- Harassment – occurs when a cyberbully sends persistent and harmful online messages to the victim, which may contain threats;
- Cyberstalking – the cyberbully closely monitors the victim's online presence. The abuser may also make false accusations and threats to the victim and her loved ones;
- Outing – happens when a cyber bully openly reveals someone's gender or sexual orientation without her consent with the hope of posing or embarrassing the victim;
- Doxxing – happens when a cyber bully maliciously shares personal information about the victim, such as a home address, school attended by children, etc., in order to harass and protect her;
- Fraping – occurs when a cyber bully takes over the victim's social network account and posts inappropriate content to damage their reputation;
- Trolling – occurs when a cyberbully posts derogatory comments



about them with the intention of hurting the victim

- Dissing – occurs when a cyber bully disparages the victim by spreading cruel information about them with the aim of damaging their reputation or relationships with others;
- Flaming – a cyberbully sends insults and swear words to the victim with the aim of drawing the victim into an online fight
- Denigration – occurs when a cyberbully sends a victim or posts or posts false information or gossip about the victim;
- Impersonation – occurs when a cyber bully posts fake content on behalf of the victim so that they can experience backlash from others;
- Trickery – a cyberbully may befriend a victim to gain their trust and then share secrets and other sensitive information to humiliate and embarrass them;
- Fake profiles – a cyber bully sets up a fake profile with the victim's name and uses it to post fake content on behalf of the victim without consent;
- Catfishing – a cyber bully pretends to be someone else and tries to “catch” the victim by exploiting her emotions or even entering into a romance in order to share sensitive information about her and thus embarrass, damage her reputation or expose her;

These are just some modalities of cyberbullying which are present in the cyber world. With the development of technology, it is only a matter of time before new modalities emerge. It can be especially dangerous if artificial intelligence technology is misused for this purpose because with the progress of that field, it will be very difficult to distinguish real content from content generated by artificial intelligence.

## **Consequences and Cyberbullying**

Bearing in mind that the consequences of cyberbullying are not negligible at all, as the opinion prevails in the general population, there is a need to investigate and process them in detail. A large

number of studies examined the relationship between cyberbullying and mental health problems, with the result that adolescents internalized (depression, loneliness, anxiety, suicidal ideas and somatic symptoms, etc.), and at the same time, externalized problems (use illegal substances and alcohol, delinquency, etc.) (Nixon, 2014, p. 144). The consequences of cyberbullying can be multiple, with different intensities of damage to the victims, which in many ways contribute to reducing their quality of life.

In the United Kingdom, a longitudinal study was conducted on 2,480 teenagers between 12 and 13, examining the relationship between cyberbullying and depression, social anxiety and overall mental health after one year (Fahy et al., 2016). The results showed that there is a strong connection and that cyberbullying in victims is a high risk for the future development of all the aforementioned disorders. The group of authors (Extremiera et al., 2018) investigated theoretical propositions in the relationship between cyberbullying and self-esteem, emotional intelligence and suicide risk. They concluded that cyber victimization negatively affects emotional intelligence and self-esteem but positively affects the risk of suicide. On the other hand, emotional intelligence is positively related to self-esteem and negatively related to the risk of suicide. Some research has gone further and examined the phenomenon of digital self-harm, as a consequence of cyber-victimization that does not involve suicide (Patchin et al., 2023). The mentioned study shows the connection between digital self-harm and suicide and points to the need for a more detailed examination of this connection. There are also studies that indicate that it is possible to develop eating disorders as a result of victimization in cyberspace, which can lead to new problems in adolescents (Marco & Tormo-Irun, 2018). From all of the above, it can be seen that the consequences of cyberbullying are not negligible at all, as is the prevailing opinion. They can go in several different directions: emotional, behavioural and physical.

It can be noted that the research looks at the phenomenon predominantly from a psychological, sociological and health aspect. At the same time there is not a large number of researches that

point to the security aspects of cyberbullying, except that it is linked to cyber security. For the reason mentioned above, more research should be done on the consequences of endangering security in social environments where victims of cyberbullying move and live, such as schools and other places where adolescents gather and which may be exposed to larger-scale security threats.

### **Actuality of the Problem**

Cyberbullying is a very current problem, and with the increasing dependence of modern society on digital technologies, it tends to develop rapidly and take on new forms. According to research carried out in a sample of 1000 parents, a large number of them reported some form of bullying, and in the age group of 14 to 18, almost 60% (Bischoff, 2019). The location of children greatly influences whether or not they will experience bullying. In this context, most bullying happens at school and on the bus, followed immediately by bullying in the digital world. Social networks and applications lead the way with around 19%, text messages with 11%, video games with around 8%, websites with around 7%, phone calls with around 4% and emails with around 3%.

According to the Cyberbullying Research Center, in the period from 2007 to 2021, research on the topic of cyberbullying is being conducted with over 30,000 student-respondents in high schools in the USA (Patchin, 2022). On average, about 29% of recent college students said they had been a victim of cyberbullying at some point in their lives. At the same time, there is a growing trend of this phenomenon in the last five years.

The situation in Serbia does not differ from the rest of the world. In the last few years, there have been a large number of events that are more or less associated with peer violence and, above all, with cyberbullying. The fact that women are 27 times more likely to be victims of cyberbullying is particularly worrying (Bjelajac et al., 2022, p. 160). The case that was followed by the media is the case of Kristina Kika Đukić, who took her own life after a long episode of

cyberbullying (nova.rs, 2022). It has been noticed that lately there has been a lot more talk about cyber bullying in Serbia, but there is a need to conduct research and determine the true situation.

## **Prevention of Cyberbullying**

The devastating consequences brought about by cyberbullying indicate that it is necessary to implement preventive measures in order to preserve human lives, as well as the quality of life. Like most of the measures that need to be adopted, which significantly involve humans in the interaction with ICT, they should be directed towards technologies and towards people.

If we are talking about IT, they can be used to sanction cyberbullying in an intelligent way. Although artificial intelligence as a field has been advancing recently, especially in the area of large language models due to the ChatGPT chatbot, the question becomes to what extent it can be used for the purposes of cyberbullying prevention. So, in some way, it is necessary to create a system for detecting anomalies that could recognize some form of cyberbullying in the correspondence that takes place between the victim and the cyberbully and implement some activities based on that, e.g. remove from social network or chat or ban use for some time. The busy lifestyle changes family dynamics, as the authors point out, and there is less and less time devoted primarily to children, which leads them to greater exposure to cyber pornography and digital violence (Stošić & Janković, 2022, p. 88). The intelligent tools just mentioned should monitor a child in when using the Internet and enable its safer use in various ways, e.g. informing parents via notification.

In order for people, i.e. young people in this case are equipped to fight against cyber violence, it is necessary to implement measures of an educational and psychological nature, which concern the empowerment of children and the development of emotional competences. In order to prevent this, the authors (Hinduja &

Patchin, 2018) present a whole set of situations that can indicate early signs of cyberbullying, such as if the child becomes nervous after receiving an instant or text message or seems depressed, angry or frustrated after using the computer or is withdrawn from socializing with usual friends or family members, etc. Another measure is raising awareness about cyberspace, the relationships that exist there, as well as all the problems that can arise from the use of electronic devices. Educational institutions could make a big contribution to this, which should introduce security culture into school programs with special reference to its use in the digital world.

Some comparative analyses indicate that the legal aspects of digital violence in the Republic of Serbia are currently set so that the victim of victimization is not sufficiently protected and that it is necessary to make a clear distinction between traditional and digital violence (Janković & Stošić, 2022, pp. 105–106). This is very important for a good preventive policy because the development dynamics of these two related phenomena are not the same, primarily due to the rapid development of ICT technologies and the permanent appearance of new modalities of digital violence.

## **Conclusion**

Accelerated technological development establishes a high technological dependence on ICT in modern society. In such an environment, the border between the real and the virtual is apparent, and this is especially pronounced in children and adolescents. Cyberbullying is a very complex problem, which due to the nature of ICT evolution changes very often and takes on new forms. The resulting consequences correspond to real violence, and in some cases can be even more serious. Every country should seriously approach this growing problem today and define a whole set of measures in order to prevent cyber violence as much as possible. At the same time, parents and family are left with the biggest role to recognize cyberbullying and

to empower their children in time. The state could encourage their role, by including more from the earliest days in school a safety culture and raising awareness of this previously mentioned problem.

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## Digitalno nasilje: između virtuelnog i stvarnog

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### Sažetak

U modernom društvu dolazi do intenziviranja upotrebe informaciono komunikacionih tehnologija i digitalnih servisa. Post-Covid-19 era donosi mnoge promene u svim društvenim sferama, a ističe se do sada nezabeleženim oslanjanjem na digitalne tehnologije. Mlađe generacije, koje još od najranijih dana imaju intenzivnu interakciju sa njima, pronalaze svoje mesto u sajber svetu i na taj način sve više brišu granice između realnog i digitalnog. Ranjivost ljudskog života je jedna od odlika sajber bezbednosti, kao veoma složenog fenomena koji se potpuno opravdano multidisciplinarno izučava. Sajber maltretiranje je široko prisutan fenomen, najčešće izražen među mlađom populacijom, koji može da proizvede velike negativne posledice po pojedinca, pa čak i gubitak ljudskog života. Pored toga, što je potrebno raditi na podizanju svesti i ukazivanja na nebezbedan sajber prostor u kojem se odvija interakcija i komunikacija, potrebno je sa aspekta obrazovanja i informaciono bezbednosne kulture dati efektivan odgovor, u cilju očuvanja onoga što je najvrednije. Ovaj rad ima za cilj da prikaže pomenuti fenomen i ponudi neke odgovore na njega.

*Ključne reči:* digitalno nasilje, odgovor, sajber bezbednost, bezbednosna kultura